DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 270 CG 016 463

AUTHOR Polyson, James A.
TITLE Student Essays about TV Characters: A Tool for Understanding Personality Theories.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; College Students; *Course Content; Course Evaluation; Essays; Higher Education; *Instructional Innovation; *Personality Theories; *Psychology; Relevance (Education); Student Attitudes; *Teaching Methods; *Television

ABSTRACT

One means of making undergraduate instruction more relevant to students' needs and interests has been to use popular media to illustrate concepts in psychology courses. College students (N=54) in a theories of personality course wrote brief essays explaining the behavior of television characters in terms of theories taught in the course. The character most often selected for the essays were from the television shows "MASH" and "The Guiding Light." Results of student evalutions of the assignment were very favorable. Most found the assignment quite worthwhile and none judged it to be worthless. Nearly all the students indicated that the assignment was consistent with their personal goals for the course; all students felt the task should be repeated in future semesters. Over half the students believed the assignment enhanced their enjoyment of the television program. The findings suggest that the basic reason for the success of the project is the fun involved in writing, reading, and discussing essays which apply some of the classic psychological theories to popular television characters. (JAC)

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Student Essays about TV Characters: A Tool for Understanding Personality Theories

James A. Polyson

Indiana State University

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D. C., August, 1982.

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STUDENT ESSAYS ABOUT TV CHARACTERS: A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING PERSONALITY THEORIES

Several studies have supported the idea that undergraduate instruction is more effective when the course content is relevant to the students' real-world needs and interests (e.g., Menges & Trumpeter, 1972; Solomon, 1979). One means of accomplishing that goal has been to use popular media presentations to illustrate concepts used in psychology courses. For example, Nissim-Sabat (1979) found the use of popular films such as One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest to be quite effective in helping students grasp basic concepts in Abnormal Psychology. Similarly, Maas & Toivanen (1978) used clips from the Candid Camera television show to demonstrate psychological and interpersonal phenomena in an Introductory Psychology course. Psychology instructors also have employed media-related materials in participatory exercises. Riger (1978) described a useful exercise in which students conducted content analyses of sex role portrayals in various media. Solomon (1979) facilitated the learning of experimental methods by having students replicate the experiments used to sell products in TV commercials. It appears that students respond enthusiastically to the use of popular media in the psychology classroom.

The present paper describes an exercise in which students in a Theories of Personality course wrote brief essays explaining the behavior of their favorite TV characters in terms of the theories covered in the course. I had observed in prior semesters that students seemed to respond to my own use of TV characters as examples in lectures and the decision to assign the paper was based on that observation.

Method. The exercise was assigned in two consecutive semesters. In the first semester it was offered as an extra-credit assignment. I chose not to require the paper at first because I was not sure how worthwhile it would be as a learning experience or how difficult it would be. The stated purpose of the assignment was to give the students a chance to apply the theories we had covered in the course up to that point (Freud, Adler, Horney, Reich, Erikson, Rogers, and Maslow). The maximum length was two typed pages. Students were told that the brief length would enable them to concentrate on the quality of their writing. They were instructed to focus on a specific episode of a TV show, to use the first paragraph or two to describe briefly the circumstances and plot of the episode, and then to explain in terms of a personality theory why one character behaved the way he or she did. It was pointed out that all interpretations should include a brief description of the character's specific words or actions which exemplified that concept. Students could use more than one theorist if necessary. Finally, the students were informed that after the papers were graded I would describe to the entire class the basic ideas contained in each paper and read excerpts from the best ones (unless the student indicated on the paper that he or she did not wish to have their paper read or discussed). Of the 38 students in the first semester, 20 completed the

assignment and earned extra credit. No one requested that their paper be exempted from presentation in class. At the end of the semester participants were asked to complete an anonymous evaluation which assessed whether the assignment had been worthwhile, interesting, and consistent with their personal goals for the course. An open-ended item inquired about any aspect(s) of the assignment which the student liked and/or disliked most. In the second semester, the procedure was identical except that the paper was required. Of the 36 students in that class, two requested alternate assignments because they never watch what one of them termed the "boob tube."

Results. Student evaluations of the assignment were extremely favorable for both semesters. Of the 54 participants, 78% found the assignment "quite worthwhile" and 22% judged it "somewhat worthwhile." Not a single student in either semester judged it "not very worthwhile" or "totally worthless." Eighty-one percent found it "quite interesting," 19% found it "somewhat interesting," and again not a single individual marked that it was "not very interesting" or "downright dull." Almost all of the students indicated that the assignment was consistent with their personal goals for the course. Results also show that 100% of all participants responded "yes" to an item asking whether the assignment should be repeated in future semesters.

The final questionnaire item assessed whether the assignment had had a negative or positive impact on the student's enjoyment of the program itself. I had been concerned that writing about a TV character might detract from what is undoubtedly an important source of recreation and entertainment for many students. However, a majority (65%) of the students indicated that the assignment had enhanced their enjoyment of the TV program, 6% said it had detracted, and 30% reported that the assignment had no effect on their enjoyment.

Reactions to the exercise were slightly more favorable during the first semester. Ninety per cent of the students who wrote the essay for extra credit found it both "quite worthwhile" and "quite interesting" compared to 71% and 76% respectively when the essay was required. Again, however, the response was uniformly favorable in both semesters. It is clear that some of the second semester students who might not have participated had the exercise been optional found it to be enjoyable and beneficial.

Discussion. Every student who participated in the exercise was able to find a TV character whose behavior in one episode could be understood through the application of personality theories. Twenty-eight different shows were represented among the 54 essays, with characters from MASH (7 essays) and The Guiding Light (6 essays) being the most popular. Other shows which were selected by two or more students were: Archie Bunker's Place, The Odd Couple, Dallas, The Andy Griffith Show, Mary Tyler Moore Show, General Hospital, Dynasty, Too Close for Comfort, Happy Days, Little House on the Prairie, All My Children, Taxi, Benson, One Life to Live, and Alice.

Almost all the essays seemed to be carefully written and every single paper contained at least one or two interesting, original ideas. Most of the students wrote about the maladaptive tendencies or defenses exhibited by characters like Archie Bunker, Felix Unger of The Odd Couple, Barney Fife of The Andy Griffith Show, J. R. Ewing of Dallas, and Nola Riordan of The Guiding Light. The students found no shortage of TV characters who evidence neurotic trends, psychosexual fixations, overcompensatory striving, defense mechanisms, or character armor. Characters from soap operas and evening dramas such as Flamingo Road seemed to offer particularly salient examples of psychopathology-related constructs. Examples of family conflicts also were available as students used Freud or Adler to explain the sibling rivalries on Too Close for Comfort, the pampering of Mrs. Ohlsen's adopted daughter Nancy on Little House on the Prairie, and the Oedipal overtones in one All in the Family rerun.

But there were also a number of papers which focused on the psychologically healthy behaviors of various characters. For example, one student argued quite effectively that Andy Griffith is an example of Maslow's self-actualized person and another discussed how the MASH character Hawkeye uses humor to sublimate his fear and rage about the war. One essay explained Private Judy Benjamin's enlistment in the Army as an attempt to break out of her neurotic trend of helplessness (Horney) and another excellent essay discussed how Mary Tyler Moore's organismic valuing process (Rogers) helped her decide between her job and her boyfriend. Even Archie Bunker, the subject of two essays about his underdeveloped social interest and projective defenses, was described in a third essay as exhibiting healthy rather than neurotic striving when he purchased Kelsey's Bar against the advice of friends and family. In addition, several essays contrasted a character's healthy versus neurotic behaviors.

Students' written comments indicated that one of the things they liked best about the assignment was simply having an opportunity to write about their own favorite TV character. This is consistent with a study by McKeachie, Lin, Moffett, and Daugherty (1978) which found that teaching is more effective when it allows students to express their own views and interests. Sharing their ideas with classmates also seemed to be an enjoyable experience. The class discussions were quite lively and several students wrote that the prospect of having excerpts from their paper read and discussed in class made them put more work into the assignment (which, in turn, probably made it a better learning experience for them).

The questionnaire data indicate that students did judge the exercise to be a valuable learning experience. An article by Vande Kemp (1980) argued that the use of case studies is an effective method for teaching psychological concepts. Case examples may be particularly useful for understanding the highly abstract constructs in many personality theories. Although I did not objectively measure the learning which resulted from this assignment, a number of written comments corroborated my impression that it stimulated their thinking and helped them learn the theories. Some students wrote that the assignment helped them prepare for the final exam because they had to review each theorist in order to decide which one best explained their particular character. Also, and perhaps most importantly, many students viewed the essay as an opportunity to apply what they had

learned in class. The exercise was therefore consistent with the major theme of the course: Personality theories can be useful as well as theoretical.

For 65% of the students, writing the essay was not just a useful tool for understanding personality theories; it also enhanced their enjoyment of the TV program. Consistent with the findings of Riger (1978), it appears that television can be a more rewarding experience when students become active, thoughtful consumers rather than passive recipients. Considering the maladaptive functioning modeled by many TV characters, the benefits to students who apply an understanding of psychology to their TV viewing may involve more than enhanced enjoyment. Although research on the behavioral effects of TV has focused on the modeling of aggression, there is some preliminary evidence that uncritical TV viewing can have other types of detrimental influences on young people. For example, Corder-Bolz and Cox (Note 1) found that adolescent girls who accepted as realistic the romanticized love relationships on TV were far more likely to become pregnant. Although their study did not prove a causal relationship, there is cause for concern. One way of addressing that concern is to help our students learn to watch TV intelligently by applying the knowledge they learn in the classroom.

In summary, this was a very rewarding exercise for the students and for me, as well. I think that perhaps the basic reason for its success was the fun involved in writing, reading, and discussing essays which applied some of the classic theories of psychology to the popular characters of TV.

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Notes

1. Corder-Bolz, C., & Cox, C. Impact of television upon adolescent girls' sexual attitudes and behavior. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, Canada, September, 1980.
2. Address reprint requests to James, A. Polyson, Psychology Department, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809.